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ABSTRACT

A case study was done of the community-based education reform group, Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools in Washington, D.C. Data for the study came from written records; from interviews with Parents United staff and officers, members of the Board of Education, and others familiar with public education in Washington, D.C.; and from public hearings. Records included newsletters, minutes of meetings, testimony, press releases, grant proposals, clippings, and other materials. Parents United is a research, education, and advocacy group whose mission is to ensure that the City provides adequate funding for public schools and high quality education services to students. It was founded in 1980 in response to a budget crisis and has continued as an organization concerned with the total budget process. Analysis of information on the group found that the general principles underlying its strategy include a focus on creating alliances, pragmatic selection of issues based on inclusiveness and tangibility, and a preference for negotiation over confrontation. Achievements have included making public education a front burner issue for local government and educating and mobilizing parents. Criticisms include perceptions that Parents United is a mostly white, affluent group with too narrow a focus on budget issues. Sixty-two footnotes are included. (JB)

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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

IN PUBLIC EDUCATION:

PARENTS UNITED

FOR THE D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Occasional Paper 11
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Foreword

Schools hold the formal responsibility for education, but ultimately a city's ability to educate its children depends on the mobilization of a broader range of its resources and energies. Schools cannot do it alone; nor should they.

Advocacy groups representing citizens and parents are one key element in the constellation of forces that shape the educational environment. In this paper, Anna Speicher focuses attention on Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools, and offers her assessment of the tactics it has pursued and the contributions it has made.

Her research represents a first stage in a longer-term project that the Center for Washington Area Studies will be undertaking to determine the elements that allow a city to undertake aggressive and sustained initiatives to invest in its human resources. The planned project will link the study of the District to parallel investigations of education decision-making in nine other large cities across the United States. Why are some cities seemingly better able to muster the civic will and capacity to develop a strong and effective education system? This paper, and the broader project, are intended to give us some answers, and to provide some helpful guidance to those hoping to elevate the call for educational reform from rhetoric to reality.

Jeffrey R. Henig
Director

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION: PARENTS UNITED FOR THE D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I. INTRODUCTION

As in many other urban areas, public education in the District of Columbia has been a problem for years. Scores on standardized tests have been well below the national average. The student dropout rate is high. School facilities, some of which are over 100 years old, are greatly in need of repairs. Tension between the Mayor, the D.C. Council, the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education has made it difficult to mount a comprehensive policy response.

It is, perhaps, a truism to say that the health of public education depends on the quality of the interaction between local government and the community. There are no doubt many different ways, at least theoretically, to achieve a balance in this relationship that results in a strong public education system. An assumption of this study is that, in practice, community participation is an important element in public education reform. The question remains, however, as to what form of participation is most effective.

There are a variety of ways of classifying strategies for community involvement in public issues. Broadly speaking, they may be grouped into two models: one of confrontation, the other of collaboration. In the first model, community mobilization is viewed as essentially conflictual. Reformers are perpetual outsiders, by desire as well as circumstance. Their mission is to force change from the outside by disruption of the status quo. By refusing to ally themselves with any individual or group in power,

these reformers avoid the pitfalls of compromise and cooptation. This approach has been most closely associated with practitioner and theoretician Saul Alinsky.[1]

In contrast, the goal of the second model is not to create conflict but to form alliances. It is believed that the best way of achieving change is to seek allies, particularly among individuals and groups who wield power. In this model, rather than be satisfied with being outside the power structure, a reform group works to achieve insider status, or at least to be associated with insiders. Michael Lipsky argues that relatively powerless groups ultimately need to attract support from third parties: individuals and groups that are richer in resources and political clout. While protest may help gain the attention of such third parties, an overly confrontational style risks alienating potential allies.[2]

To determine the effectiveness of strategies for community involvement, it is helpful to examine actual situations. Because this study focuses on Washington, D.C., it is logical to consider the history of community-based education reform groups in that area. In Washington's recent history, one such group stands out. That group is Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools, formed in 1980. Parents United is interesting because of its institutional strength and longevity, its legitimacy (as perceived by community, government and the media), and because of the way it has employed strategies for community intervention in education issues. It is hoped that this case study will enhance current theory regarding community participation in public

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[1]Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Rebels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

[2]Michael Lipsky, *Protest in City Politics: Rent Strikes, Housing and the Power of the Poor* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1970).

education and that it will be relevant to the practice of public education reform in other cities.

II. Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C. is in many respects similar to other urban areas. Like other cities, the District faces problems of poverty and homelessness, budget crises and crime, in addition to problems in the area of public education. In such fundamental ways, the District of Columbia is a city among many.

Washington does, however, have some unique characteristics and its value as a case study is dependent upon recognizing and evaluating these differences. Most importantly, Washington is in the unique position of being the federal city. This has a number of implications. First, Washington is the only city in the United States that has been directly governed by the U.S. Congress. After a brief experiment with local self-governance during the 1870s, the District of Columbia has spent most of its political life as a ward of the federal government. In 1968, the Board of Education became the first elected body in the District in almost one hundred years. (This itself has had consequences for public education in the District which will be addressed later in this analysis.) In 1974, Washington was granted home rule, leading to a locally elected Mayor and D.C. Council. Because of these factors, Washington has had a relatively short history of managing its own government. Consequently, political relationships are still considerably more fluid in the District than in most other American cities, many of which have had a century or more of experience in local government.

Furthermore, in spite of home rule, the Congress still oversees the District's policy and budget-making process. In fact, the final stage of the District's annual budgetary process is approval by Congress. Congressional committees hold oversight hearings on policy matters related to the District. Education has been one of the areas that has received considerable congressional attention, often not of a positive nature. In 1970, for example, a subcommittee of the House Committee on the District of Columbia investigated the D.C. public schools. Its final report concluded--not mincing words--that the school system "'was floundering in its own incompetence' and the victim of 'too many layers of administrative fat.'"[3] One can only imagine the furor if suddenly Toledo, Ohio were expected to submit its budget and administrative procedures to the Congress for such evaluation.

Another result of the federal presence is the heightened national awareness of local events in the District. Washington, D.C. receives national media attention out of proportion to its size. This has been true since its founding. In the 1800s, for example, abolitionists singled out the District of Columbia for intense criticism because of local involvement in the slave trade--and succeeded in having the trade abolished as part of the Compromise of 1850.[4] Meanwhile, neighboring Alexandria, Virginia

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[3]U.S. Congress, House Committee on the District of Columbia, *Investigation and Study of the Public School System of the District of Columbia*. Quoted by Steven Diner in "Crisis of Confidence: The Reputation of Washington's Public Schools in the Twentieth Century," (Washington, D.C.: University of the District of Columbia, Department of Urban Studies, 1982), 43.

[4]For additional information on the history of abolition in Washington, see Constance McLaughlin Green, *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967). For a general discussion of the Compromise of 1850 and its effects, see, for example, William L. Birney, *The Passage of the Republic*

maintained a flourishing business in the buying and selling of human beings. Likewise, today the problems of the District, such as homicide and homelessness, which are shared by many cities, receive considerable national attention. Although this paper does not provide an answer, it does not seem unreasonable to raise the question of how this national attention may affect the course of local politics and reform activity.

In the area of public education, Washington, D.C. also has some significant characteristics. In many cities, the school system has the power to levy its own taxes. In the District, however, as in a minority of other cities, the school system is completely dependent for its funding on action taken by the D.C. Council and Mayor.[5] Relations between the school board, the Council, and the Mayor have often been acrimonious.

In addition, from the 1960s on, disputes within the Board of Education, between the Board and the Superintendent of Schools, and between both of those and community leaders, have been common. According to urban historian Steven Diner, public dissatisfaction with central school administration can be traced to the 1960s when, despite the black majority in the District schools (the student body was 90% black and the teaching staff was approximately 75% black), there was a white majority on the Board, which at that time was appointed rather than elected. Community dissatisfaction was amplified by the media. In 1965, a Washington Post columnist

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(Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1987).

[5]Comparative information provided by Sam Husk, former Executive Director of The Council for the Great City Schools, tape recorded interview with author, Washington, D.C., November 4, 1991.

wrote that the D.C. School Board "continues on its meandering course marked by long-winded meetings and petty squabbles between members, oblivious to the kind of picture it presents to the public."[6] Friction within and among these groups has continued to the present. The quite popular Superintendent Vincent Reed resigned in 1980 claiming that he found it too difficult to work with the Board.[7] In 1985, Mayor Marion Barry attempted unilaterally to reduce the approved school budget and was successfully sued by the School Board. In 1990, the Board fired Superintendent Andrew Jenkins. In early 1992, Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly was criticized by the School Board and education reform groups for proposing a fiscal year 1993 budget falling $5 million short of the previous year's budget and nearly $45 million below the figure requested by the Board and Superintendent. All this dissension almost certainly restricts the ability of the school system to focus on the needs of public school students.

What makes consideration of the political environment especially important in the case of the District is the curious juxtaposition of poor academic achievement with a solid foundation of human resources in the city. The District has one of the highest percentages of college-educated residents in the nation: 27.5%, in 1980, as compared to a national average of 16.2%.[8] Personal income per capita was $23,491 in 1989,

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[6]Washington Post, July 5, 1965. Quoted by Diner in "Crisis of Confidence", 34.

[7]Diner, 50.

[8]National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics 1990* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

placing it second only to Connecticut and New Jersey among the nation's states.[9] Per capita spending per student for 1987-88 was $837 in Washington, compared to the national average of $690.36.[10]

It is true that the District also has a high percentage of children living in economic distress. Twenty seven percent of the District's children under 18 years old were living in poverty in 1979 compared to a national average of 16.0 percent; D.C. was behind only Mississippi in this dismal sense.[11] Many of the most prosperous and highly educated, moreover, are white residents, most of whom either do not have school age children or choose to send their children to private school.[12] But the District is also home to a large, stable, middle-class and professional African-American population that has a long history of valuing education.

All the more frustrating, then, is the mounting evidence that Washington has a poor track record in the area of public education. In SAT scores, the District consistently ranks near the bottom as compared to the fifty states in both verbal and

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[9]U.S. Bureau of the Census, *State and Metropolitan Area Data Book 1991* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991), 251.

[10]*Digest of Education Statistics 1990.*

[11]U.S. Bureau of the Census, *State and Metropolitan Area Data Book 1991*, 254.

[12] In Ward 3, the wealthiest ward, only 34% of all households had a child under 18 years old in 1990; in Ward 8, the lowest income ward, the comparable figure was 72 percent.D.C. Committee on Public Education, *A Time to Act*, p. 23. Over 12,500 school-age children living in the District do not attend its public schools. This compares to a public school enrolment of approximately 80,700. *Superintendent's Report to the Board of Education, 1990-1*, 24.

math skills.[13] In 1988-89, for example, District students scored an average of 407 points in verbal skills, with only Georgia, Hawaii, North Carolina and South Carolina averaging less (and not by more than ten points). In math, for the same year, the District tied with North and South Carolina for last place (with 439 points). This comparison, moreover, is based on students residing in the District whether or not they attend D.C. public schools. According to a statistical profile prepared by the school system, D.C. public school students in 1990 scored 88 points below the national average on the verbal examination, and 106 points below average in math.[14] A nationwide assessment of the mathematical abilities of children in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth-grades found the District's students ranked behind every other jurisdiction except the Virgin Islands--and this in spite of the fact that the District's students and teachers reported spending more time than others in focusing on math skills.[15] Generally speaking, it appears that the longer District students remain in the school system, the farther behind the national average they fall; while third-graders score above national norms on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in math and reading,

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[13]It can be argued, however, that it would be more appropriate to compare the performance of the District with other cities rather than with states, which of course include suburban and rural schools as well as urban ones. This data was, unfortunately, not available for the purposes of this study.

[14] *A Five Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools, School Years 1986-87 Through 1990-91*, 31.

[15] National Center for Education Statistics, The State of Mathematics Achievement (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, June 1991):17-31.

eleventh graders score well below national norms, and their performance has continued to slide over the past several years.[16]

Inner-city school systems in general face many problems, but a case can be made that the District of Columbia is better positioned than many to be a leader in meeting the educational needs of its youth. The city has the basic financial and human resources to do better. But it appears that those resources have not been fully mobilized and directed to the task. In this sense, the educational problem facing the District can be recognized as political: an issue of organizing a long-term broad base of support, not simply a problem to be solved by introducing new education initiatives, making changes in school management, or improving overall teacher quality.

III. PARENTS UNITED FOR THE D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS[17]

A. Overview and History.

Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools (Parents United) is a research, education and advocacy group whose mission is to ensure that the city "provide[s] adequate funding for our public schools and a high quality of education services to

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[16] D.C. Committee on Public Education, *A Time To Act* (Washington, D.C.: D.C. Committee on Public Education, 1992), 7.

[17]This summary and analysis is based on written records and on interviews with Parents United staff and officers, members of the Board of Education, and others familiar with public education in Washington, D.C. Parents United graciously answered questions and provided access to their records, which included newsletters, minutes of meetings, testimony, press releases, grant proposals, clippings, and other material. Further information was gathered at public hearings held by the D.C. Board of Education, the Mayor, and the House Subcommittee on the Judiciary and Education of the House Committee on the District Columbia and at Parents United events, including the fall annual membership meeting and a steering committee meeting.

our students."[18] Parents United achievements, which will be discussed in more detail later, include increases in the school budget, various school system reforms (such as increased availability of textbooks and supplies, the regular presence of nurses and trainers in schools and at athletic events, and better repairs and maintenance of school facilities), and passage of the D.C. Public Schools Act (which mandated regular public hearings on the schools). The group has succeeded not only in surviving for over ten years (a feat in itself for a small not-for-profit organization) but in establishing itself as a widely acknowledged and respected authority on school issues. Largely because of its work, education has become a focal issue for D.C. government. Last and certainly not least Parents United has educated and mobilized parents who now feel comfortable bringing concerns about their children's education directly to the Board of Education and the Mayor and the D.C. Council.

Parents United was founded in 1980 in the midst of a public school budget crisis. During the summer, 700 public school teachers were laid off. For the following fiscal year, Mayor Marion Barry proposed a $238 million budget, $27 million short of the $265 million that had been requested by the Board of Education.

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, directed by Roderic Boggs, was at that time already using the legal process to address problems in schools. The Committee is one of several chapters in the nation established in response to the racial disturbances of 1968. Its mission is "to provide high quality pro bono legal services to victims of discrimination and poverty" in Washington, focusing

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[18]Parents United, "Informed Parents = Effective Advocates," n.d.

on the areas of employment, discrimination in public accommodations, housing, refugee and immigrant rights, and public education and child care.[19] Through the Committee's Public Education Legal Services Project, begun in 1979, lawyers helped parents in some of the poorer wards in the District get improved school facilities and services.

According to Boggs, however, "there was not an effective city-wide [education] advocacy group in existence in 1980-81."[20] When the teacher lay-offs and budget proposals were announced, Boggs and the Washington Lawyers' Committee assembled a coalition of parents from the wards involved in the Public Education Legal Services Project and from parents in the more affluent wards. (Boggs himself was one of the latter.) This marked the beginning of Parents United for Full Public School Funding (as the group was first called).

Initially, Parents United distributed leaflets, held rallies, testified at D.C. Council hearings and before Congress, and released a report comparing the District's school budget to that of Montgomery County, Maryland, a neighboring suburban school system.[21] The organizers were remarkably successful in attracting parents both to the rallies and to the hearings to testify. Approximately 1000 parents attended a rally

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[19]Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, program brochure, Washington, D.C., n.d.

[20]Roderic Boggs, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., September 19, 1992.

[21]Parents United, "Parents United Chronology," *Commemorative Program for Parents United 10th Anniversary Gala,* October 13, 1990, 9.

The Washington-Montgomery County study reported that the D.C. schools spent $500 less per pupil per year than the Montgomery County schools.

held at the District Building on October 30, 1980. Parents from fifty schools testified to the needs of their children's schools at hearings held by the D.C. Council. Through these efforts Parents United was able to draw media--and therefore, public--attention to the school budget process in an unprecedented way. The end result was two separate increases in the fiscal 1982 school budget amounting to $28 million.

Parents United, by then an established actor in the public education arena, continued to focus on maintaining and increasing the school budget through the early 1980s. As early as 1982, the organization did broaden its scope somewhat to include concerns about the distribution of school system funds and the administration of the system, in addition to demands for funding increases for the system as a whole. For example, in February, 1982, Parents United released an analysis of the current teacher contract negotiations. This document advocated teacher salary increases, a half hour increase in the teacher workday and implementation of teacher evaluation procedures.[22] In December of the same year, the group released its recommendations regarding teacher evaluation.[23]

Still, throughout the first few years, the main thrust of the organization concerned the total budget process. With the exception of the input on teacher salary and evaluation, Parents United *Updates* (the membership newsletter) into early 1984 focused almost exclusively on the need to lobby for a total budget figure for the public

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[22]Parents United, "Educational Impact Assessment," February, 1982.

[23]This report included recommendations that teachers be evaluated based on performance, through an objective observation instrument and that teachers be observed regularly in the classroom.

schools. Only since the beginning of 1984 has Parents United consistently addressed issues involving the allocation of funding. This historical evolution was explained by Erika Landberg, Co-Chair of Parents United, in testimony before the Education Committee of the D.C. Council in February, 1985:

> In past years, the budget situation for the public schools has been so terrible, the threat of teacher RIFs [Reductions in Force] so very real, we parents have had to spend all our energies just lobbying against cuts, perhaps trying to stay even, and working very hard toward some kind of stable funding. Now that the school system seems to be less threatened by massive cuts, we have been able to turn some of our energies inward, so to speak. Inward to work with the school system to help improve it, where in the past we hoped merely to save it.[24]

In January, 1984, Parents United released a major study of the implications for the District of a report published by the National Education Commission. In the document, "Parents United's Recommendations for Educational Excellence in the D.C. Public Schools," the group outlined its first comprehensive recommendations for school system reform. Among its proposals were: teacher salary increases, to be tied to performance standards; lower student-teacher ratios for children with special needs; pre-kindergarten to be made available to all eligible students; a one-year

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[24]Erika Landberg, Testimony on behalf of Parents United before the Education Committee of the Council of the District of Columbia, February 13, 1985.

program on writing skills for high school students; and special programs for teens with serious academic or behavioral problems.[25]

In February, 1986, Parents United released its first survey of school building conditions. Since that time facilities maintenance and improvement has become a major issue for the group. In April, 1990, the group released a report based on D.C. Fire Department inspection reports, documenting over 10,000 fire code violations in the 174 public schools in the District.[26]

Parents United has also led an effort to force the school system to comply with regulations concerning the presence of trainers and nurses in schools and at school athletic events. In 1989, Parents United filed suit against the District. The court ruled that the schools must comply immediately with the rules requiring the presence of medical staff at athletic events and granted them one year to comply with the statute concerning nurses in school buildings. The next fall Parents United went back to court asking that the District be held in contempt of court for failing to fulfill the latter injunction and this too was granted.

Parents United continues to target the overall budget figure recommended by the Mayor and D.C. Council. In addition, the group regards the maintenance and improvement of school facilities as crucial, along with a less well-defined interest in

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[25]Virginia Koehler and Mary Levy, "Parents United's Recommendations for Educational Excellence in the D.C. Public Schools: The Implications of National Studies," Parents United, January, 1984.

[26]These fire inspection reports were attained through the filing of Freedom of Information requests with the D.C. Fire Department. This work was performed by the law firm Steptoe and Johnson, acting pro bono for Parents United.

improving teacher quality throughout the school system.[27] Parents United currently has a paid staff of three--the executive director, a financial analyst, and a secretary. Policy is set by the steering committee, composed of officers, ward representatives (parents) and staff members. The staff is housed at the Washington Lawyers' Committee and Rod Boggs, as legal counsel, continues to play an active role. For the fiscal year ending September 30, 1991, the operating budget was $133,000. $54,000 of that total was derived from membership dues. Most of the remainder came from grants. The two largest funders in recent years have been the Rockefeller Foundation and the Washington-based Committee on Public Education (COPE).[28]

This overview has been provided to give the reader some background on the history and structure of Parents United. Following are discussion and analysis of Parents United's strategy and achievements.

B. Strategy.

In talking with Parents United members and others, observing activities and studying the records, it is clear that some general principles underlie Parents United strategies. These principles include a focus on creating alliances, pragmatic selection

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[27]Boggs, September 19, 1992 interview.

[28]Parents United has succeeded in attracting outside funding in the past, but is concerned about future funding. In order to meet its budget in the last fiscal year, the group was forced to draw upon operating reserves due to an unexpected decrease in funding from COPE. (For more information on COPE, see page 15.) In applying for foundation money, Parents United faces two major obstacles: many foundations are willing to fund only special programs, rather than the general operating budget; and additionally, foundations tend to be reluctant to fund advocacy organizations such as Parents United.

of issues based on inclusiveness and tangibility, and a preference for negotiation over confrontation.

1. Creation of alliances.

Parents United is concerned, first, to establish a broad membership base. Official membership is on a school rather than an individual basis; however, a school is considered a member if any individual from that school contributes money or time to Parents United activities. In addition, any individual may receive Parents United mailings upon request. Currently, 134 of the District's 169 regular public schools are considered members. Member schools are distributed throughout the District's eight wards. The Parents United mailing list includes over 2000 names of individuals who receive *Updates* and other information.

Second, Parents United works in cooperation with other education groups. There is considerable overlap in membership between local PTAs and Parents United. Parents United includes PTA presidents on its mailing list for member schools and recruits PTA members into its activities. Likewise, according to Rod Boggs, Parents United's activities have spurred on some parents to become more active participants in their own local PTAs.[29]

Relationships with two other groups are particularly significant. The Washington Parent Group Fund is another education group founded by the Washington Lawyers Committee. Established in 1981, the Parent Group Fund solicits corporate and

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[29]Boggs, videotaped presentation at seminar, "Revenue Enhancement: How to do Better in Hard Times," Tape 4. Seminar sponsored by The Council of The Great City Schools, Washington, D.C., March 16-19, 1985.

foundation matching funds for school projects proposed by parents in the lower income wards. Projects have included purchase of texts for school and home use, establishment of music and dance programs, provision of counseling and tutorial services, foreign language instruction, and incentives for student attendance and performance. Parents United and the Parent Group Fund are formally independent, but are informally linked through information exchange and overlapping membership. In a report commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation, an independent consultant concluded that "together Parents United and the Parent Group Fund constitute a 'whole' significantly more valuable than the sum of the two organizational parts. There appears to be a true 'synergy' between these two entities. . ."[30]

The other group is less closely affiliated, but still considered to be a partner in education reform. This is the D.C. Committee on Public Education (COPE), a committee of business and community leaders established in 1988 by former School Superintendent Andrew Jenkins. In 1989, COPE issued a report, *Our Children, Our Future*, which outlined goals for public education in the District of Columbia. These goals are similar to suggestions Parents United had made in the past. One of the Parents United staff positions, that of the financial analyst, is funded by COPE. Most recently, both COPE and Parents United attempted to persuade the Mayor and the D.C. Council to increase the District's fiscal year 1993 budget allocation to the school

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[30]Donald Hamilton Ogilvie, "An Assessment of Impact and Potential: Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools; Washington Parent Group Fund; Washington Lawyers' Committee," submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation July 17, 1989, 6.

system. So, again, while Parents United and COPE are clearly separate entities, there is considerable overlap in their interests and efforts.

Third, Parents United attempts to maintain a cordial relationship with local (and federal) government officials, particularly with the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools. This task is considerably easier at present as four of the eleven current board members have themselves been officers of Parents United.[31] In elections Parents United attempts to elicit public statements on candidates' positions on issues but remains nonpartisan. When government committees and task forces are created, Parents United attempts to get representatives appointed to them.

2. Issue Selection.

Parents United takes a pragmatic approach to issue selection. Issues are chosen on the basis of two major criteria: broad appeal and tangibility. In terms of the former, Parents United selects issues that it judges to be more or less inclusive, that is, issues that touch as many schools, children and parents as possible. As Rod Boggs succinctly stated, Parents United's focus is on "issues that unite and don't divide."[32] By concentrating on such (in the words of Executive Director Delabian Rice-Thurston) "God, Motherhood and Country" issues, Parents United hopes to draw

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[31]Board members Erika Landberg, Linda Moody, Jay Silberman, and Iris Toyer have served as Co-Chairs of Parents United, as did two former board members Bob Boyd and Phyllis Young. Wanda Washburn, another current School Board member, has been very active in Parents United, although never as an officer. In addition, as a concerned parent and a PTA president, at-large member Karen Shook has been on the Parents United mailing list for years, although she, too, has never served as an officer.

[32]Boggs, Great City Schools seminar videotape, Tape 4.

broad support for its proposals.[33] Campaigning for a larger school budget, improvements in building conditions and nursing staffing are all examples of such generically appealing issues.

Second, Parents United bases its work on research, persuasion and, if necessary, litigation. While the group is concerned about issues such as teacher quality, the intangibility of such issues makes it hard to act in accordance with its standard procedures. As Mary Levy, the financial analyst noted, the fact that "[t]here is no law that says teachers have to be competent" puts that issue somewhat outside Parents United's current scope.[34] On the other hand, pressuring the school system to remedy fire code violations or to comply with nursing staff regulations is the sort of concrete action for which Parents United, with its access to pro bono legal counsel, is very well-suited. Likewise, Parents United has successfully made the case for increased funding for the school system by its careful comparative analyses of city and suburban school budgets.

3. Negotiation not confrontation.

Despite its willingness to litigate as a last resort, Parents United prefers to negotiate rather than agitate. While Parents United is willing to use confrontation,

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[33]Delabian Rice-Thurston, Executive Director of Parents United, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., September 19, 1991.

[34]Mary Levy, Parents United Financial Analyst, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, DC, September 19, 1991. Levy went on to note that this does not mean Parents United does not try to act on such issues, which it considers critical, but that "you can't move forward in the same straightforward kind of way that you could when there's a law [that can be invoked]. . ." In another conversation on February 18, 1992, Levy referred to improvements in teacher quality and curriculum standards as "the next frontier" for Parents United.

including media exposure, as a tactic, in general the group prefers not to alienate local government officials. For example, in November, 1991, Parents United released a study critical of the school system's efforts in downsizing staff. The study claimed, among other things, that the system's efforts to cut central administration staff have been ineffectual. The study was, however, released with little fanfare, its purpose being to bring the problem to the attention of the school system rather than to evoke public outrage.[35] All interviewees connected with Parents United concurred with Mary Levy that particularly in the beginning, in the face of massive budget cuts, it would have been "ridiculous to sit around being hypercritical. . . when they [the Mayor and D.C. Council were basically dismantling the school system."[36] Since then, without such severe budget crises, Parents United generally has been able to adopt the role of "critical friends" of the school system.[37] In particular, Parents United has tried to remain on good terms with the Superintendent of Schools. Their show of support for the newly-appointed Superintendent, Franklin Smith, who began his job in July, 1991, is one example of this. In general, the Parents United philosophy regarding attitude and strategy is that while "you've got to call them the way you see them,"[38] support is a more effective tactic than criticism.[39]

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[35]Levy, comment to author, Washington, D.C., December 4, 1991.

[36]Levy, September 19, 1991 interview.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Boggs, September 19, 1991 interview.

[39]Levy, September 19, 1991 interview.

C. Achievements.

Most obviously, Parents United has won battles related to its issues agenda. Observers agree that the group was in large part responsible for the restoration of funds to the fiscal 1981 budget and for increases in the budget since then. In a private assessment of Parents United commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1989, consultant Donald Ogilvie concluded that Parents United's work has directly or indirectly resulted in a host of reforms including smaller classes, a full-day pre-kindergarten program, testing of incoming teachers, the extension of the teacher work day by one-half hour, an increase in the availability of texts and supplies, building repairs, and improved nursing services.[40] In addition, in 1987, Parents United was influential in securing passage of the D.C. Public Schools Act. This nonbinding initiative, passed by a 77% majority despite the editorial opposition of the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*, declared public education in the District of Columbia to be "of the highest priority." More concretely, it called for regular public hearings on school issues, including budget proposals. So, in terms of its issue advocacy, Parents United has compiled an impressive track record.

Second, unlike so many community reform efforts which come and go, Parents United has succeeded both in staying in existence and in establishing itself as a legitimate, credible organization. It is well known as an advocate of education reform in the District. It is a sophisticated organization, having benefitted from its access to excellent pro bono legal counsel and research skills. Parents United's statistical

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[40]Ogilvie, Rockefeller Foundation Report, 8.

reports and budget analyses are widely respected. Its own budget is a limiting factor; but compared to many small not-for-profit organizations, Parents United has done well in securing outside support. The group maintains a consistent presence at public hearings on education held by the Board of Education, the Mayor and D.C. Council, and the Congress. The new Superintendent of Schools was a guest speaker at the Parents United 1991 annual fall membership meeting. It is rare that an article on local public education not include a quote from a Parents United spokesperson. Simply stated, Parents United is in the enviable position of being viewed as a group with clout; a group that local government officials must acknowledge and to whom the local media turn as an authority on public education in the District.

Third, Parents United has succeeded in making public education a front burner issue for local government. While the group still is not satisfied with the school system budget, especially in light of expenditures in other areas such as the District's central administration, it is clear that no Mayor or Council can arbitrarily cut the school budget or ignore demands for its increase. The perceived importance of education is perhaps most clearly reflected in the current composition of the Board of Education. Election to the Board, a position which numerous interviewees commented formerly tended to be viewed simply as a stepping stone to higher political office, has become the goal of individuals whose primary concern is education. The presence of four former Parents United activists on the current Board supports that conclusion. Linda Moody, a fairly new Board member but a long-time advocate of D.C. public schools, commented: "For the first time we have a Board that's really concerned about educating children. I

think it's probably the first time in thirteen years."[41] And as early as 1985, Hilda Mason, a member of the D.C. Council, noted that the work of Parents United had made the Mayor and the D.C. Council aware that their actions regarding education are being "monitored."[42] Parents United deserves a considerable amount of the credit for this change in governmental attitude toward public education in the District.

Finally, through the efforts of Parents United, along with the earlier Public Education Services Project and the Washington Parent Group Fund, parents have been educated and mobilized. Parents United distills budget information, surveys school conditions and presents this information to its constituents in a manageable form. Parents and teachers appear to be increasingly comfortable in attending and testifying at hearings on behalf of their children and their children's schools. Mary Levy commented, for example, that when she first began attending public school board hearings in the early 1980s, it was rare for more than three or four parents to attend and testify. In contrast, a recent hearing for Wards 6 and 7 lasted until midnight due to the large number of people testifying.[43] This revolution in attitude and confidence may in and of itself be worth more than all the rest in terms of the long-term health of public education in Washington, D.C.

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[41]Linda Moody, Ward 8 Representative to the D.C. Board of Education, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., October 30, 1991.

[42]Hilda Mason, videotaped comments at the seminar "Revenue Enhancement: How to do Better in Hard Times," sponsored by The Council of the Great City Schools, Washington, D.C., March 16-19, 1985, Tape 4.

[43]Levy, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., February 18, 1992.

D. Criticisms.

1. Lack of representativeness.

A criticism that is leveled at Parents United from a variety of sources is that the group has a white, middle class bias. One interviewee mentioned a general perception that Parents United is composed of "Ward 3 white folks."[44] Sam Husk, the former Executive Director of The Council of the Great City Schools commented that:

> "My impression . . . is that Parents United is a group that wants to keep middle class individuals and families in Washington, D.C. public schools. So they want public schools to be viable. I'm not sure that Parents United is as strongly interested as they should be in the inequities within the school district."[45]

Husk believes that the "hardest pressed" areas such as Anacostia need additional funding and better teacher assignment.

Increasing the level of parent interest and involvement in Parents United, particularly in the poorer wards, is an issue that Parents United acknowledges. It has been addressed at Steering Committee meetings and at least one grant proposal has been based on a recruitment strategy for parents in these wards. The charge of bias, however, is one that was denied by all those interviewed who are or have been

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[44]Dwight Cropp, Special Assistant to the President, The George Washington University, interview by author, Washington, D.C., August 22, 1991.

Ward 3 is the most affluent ward in the District and the one that contains the highest percentage of white residents.

[45]Husk, November 4, 1991 interview.

associated with Parents United. The consensus was that that criticism is "just a convenient argument."[46]

Iris Toyer and Linda Moody are two African American women, both former officers of Parents United, who have been elected recently to the Board of Education. They were perhaps the most vehement in refuting the charge that Parents United is composed of "Ward 3 white folks." According to Toyer:

> That is ridiculous. People that have not been active in Parents United say that. People that have been active don't say that. Parents United is nothing more than an umbrella group that brings parents from all across this city together.[47]

In response to a follow-up question as to why this criticism is heard so often, Toyer responded:

> Because it is always easier to attack something . . . . If you're trying to promote yourself then you want to attack. . .what is out there as opposed to joining it . . . . Every time I hear that I consider the source.[48]

Linda Moody basically concurred, but added that financial hardship does make it more difficult for lower income parents to attend meetings:

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[46]Boggs, September 19, 1991 interview.

[47]Iris Toyer, Ward 6 Representative to the D.C. Board of Education, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., October 18, 1991.

[48]Ibid.

> When you've got social problems holding you back, you've got a tendency not to get involved in a lot of community things because first of all you can't get the bus downtown to do anything about it anyway. And nobody's going to offer to pay your bus fare . . . ."[49]

Moody felt, however, that overall activity was reasonably balanced in terms of race.

Jay Silberman, another School Board member and former Parents United officer sees this criticism as part of a broader view in which people mischaracterize the distribution of resources in the city:

> There's been this myth that some parts of the city get all the resources and others get none and this is absolutely a myth. The fact is that ceilings are falling in, playgrounds are nonexistent: all these problems plague the entire city.[50]

Like Moody and Toyer, Silberman believes that Parents United does address these across-the-board problems.

A related criticism is that Parents United leadership is not sufficiently representative of the population it serves. In his report to the Rockefeller Foundation, David Ogilvie noted that in a group in which the major policy decisions are made by a fairly small cadre of staff and volunteers, this leadership is disproportionately white.[51]

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[49]Linda Moody, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., October 30, 1991.

[50]Jay Silberman, At-Large Member of the D.C. Board of Education, tape recorded interview by author, Washington, D.C., October 21, 1991.

[51]Of the current leadership, Executive Director Delabian Rice-Thurston is black; Rod Boggs, Mary Levy, and Lorraine Wilson, the secretary, are white. One of the Co-Chairs is black; the other is white. Of the other officers and active (according to Rice-Thurston)

Parents United has tried to address the problem of leadership representativeness in a number of ways. The group makes a point of having the Co-Chair positions filled by one white and one black person. In 1986, on Executive Director Delabian Rice-Thurston's initiative, up to three representatives from each ward were added to the policy-making Steering Committee. Unfortunately, it is also the case that ward representatives often do not show up for these meetings. In the absence of active participation by such representatives, policy tends to be made by a few, "by the people who do the work."[52]

In a grant proposal submitted to the New World Foundation, Parents United requested funds to enable them to recruit more activists from the poorer wards. The minutes of a number of Steering Committee meetings show that the topic of broader membership recruitment has been raised a number of times. As with many volunteer groups, there is difficulty getting people to be active at all, particularly at the leadership level. When asked about how Parents United officers are selected, Iris Toyer's response was that "Delabian gets on the phone and begs people."[53] It seems clear that Parents United would not turn away anyone who was interested in being an active participant. On the other hand, it is also significant that when that subject was discussed at one Steering Committee meeting, an issue was raised that broadening

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ward representatives, four are black and two are white.

[52]Levy, comment to author, October 1, 1991.

[53]Toyer, October 18, 1991 interview.

the membership might dilute Parents United's purpose.[54] In a study of Parents United and other education advocacy groups, Atlanta University professor William Denton concluded that as a result of being run by highly educated parents, in most of these groups "'research, networking, and information dissemination received higher priority than parent training, community organizing, or support of neighborhood groups and action.'"[55] Likewise, the cooperative rather than antagonistic approach, a basic element in Parents United's style, reflects the attitude of the founders and leaders of the group.

It appears to be true that the methods Parents United employs and perhaps some of its goals are strongly influenced by the mainly white and upper middle class composition of the leadership. The group's heavy reliance on legalistic strategy and research, rather than, say, a more decentralized grass roots campaign, clearly reflects that background. Parents United founder Rod Boggs is quite clear that he views this strategy as being more sophisticated and more effective than a grass roots approach could be.[56] It is possible that if more lower income parents could overcome the barriers to participation, some change in the goals and strategy of the organization

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[54]Parents United, Minutes of the Steering Committee meeting, August 2, 1988. The text of the statement, as recorded in the minutes was as follows: "There was some concern expressed that Parents United might dilute its thrust or be diverted from its past direction if its base were greatly broadened." There is no indication in the minutes of the level of support for or opposition to this position.

[55]William Denton, quoted by Katherine Boo in "Unite and Conquer," The City Paper, Washington, D.C., March 16-22, 1990.

[56]Boggs, comment to author, September 27, 1991.

might result. This, of course, seems to have been the underlying fear expressed in the Steering Committee meeting mentioned above.

On the other hand, while the leadership may, as Ogilvie claimed, be disproportionately white and upper middle class, it does not necessarily follow that Parents United's action must be biased toward white middle class parents. In fact, their emphasis on "consensus" issues leads them to advocacy of across-the-board issues that affect all schools in all wards. Overall budget, building repair and maintenance, and increased nursing staff are examples. Parents United has deliberately avoided advocating specialized programs, such as those for "talented and gifted" children. It is true that Parents United does not single out any area or population--including the poorer wards--for special treatment. But the counter-argument, that that is not really the mission of Parents United, is relevant, especially given the existence of the Washington Parent Group Fund, which is designed specifically for that purpose.

In conclusion, it seems fair to say that personal hardships and organizational structure may indeed make it difficult for or undesirable to some parents to participate in the policy-making process. This is not, however, a problem that is unique to Parents United. It is one that is experienced by the vast majority of community and membership-based organizations. And in this case, the end result does not appear to favor one population over another but rather secures resources that benefit school children throughout the city.

2. Narrow focus.

Parents United has been criticized for a "failure to supplement the tremendous energy and effort it has dedicated to increasing resources available to the system with pointed criticism of the gross inefficiency and the ineffectiveness with which the system has managed the resources it has had."[57] This is actually two complaints in one: 1) that Parents United is interested only in money; and 2) that the group is too accommodationist in its relationship to the Board of Education.

Parents United defends its emphasis on the overall school budget. Particularly in the early years it seemed necessary to focus on the budget to the exclusion of other issues. To reiterate Erika Landberg's comment: "In past years, the budget situation for the public schools has been so terrible . . . we parents have had to spend all our energies just lobbying against cuts. . . ."[58] Likewise, Parents United made a strategic decision in those years to avoid criticizing the Board of Education's and Superintendent's allocation of funds so that the Mayor and D.C. Council would not be handed an additional rationale for cutting the school budget.[59] Now, according to Boggs and Levy, although the budget is much more secure than it was in 1980, it is still inadequate--even supposing that all wasteful spending was eliminated--to fund badly needed teacher salary increases and facilities repair. Further, if the school budget is perceived as being imperiled (as may be the case currently), Parents United makes no bones about placing top priority on that issue.

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[57]Ogilvie, Rockefeller Report, 10.

[58]Landberg, February 13, 1985 testimony.

[59]Ogilvie, Rockefeller Report, 11.

Yet despite its emphasis on budget, it is clear that Parents United has also acted on a range of other issues, as noted elsewhere in this document. One reason for the misperception that Parents United is solely concerned with the budget was articulated by school board member Jay Silberman. He commented that the Mayor and D.C. Council at least may hold this opinion because "what goes over to the Council is the budget request."[60] Unlike the Superintendent and the Board of Education, whose function is to administer the system, the Mayor and D.C. Council are not hit with Parents United's demands for reforms within the school system. And, as has been shown, Parents United has been willing to confront the school system when their tactics of persuasion have been unsuccessful: in publishing the list of fire code violations; in suing the system for not adhering to nursing staff regulations; and, most recently, in criticizing the system's allegedly half-hearted efforts to downsize its administrative bureaucracy.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that Parents United is not the only education interest group in the city. As mentioned previously, the group benefits from its relationship to these other groups, particularly the Washington Parent Group Fund and the Committee on Public Education. This means that no one group needs to be all things to all people. It makes sense, then, for Parents United to concentrate on what it does best, which includes research, education and advocacy related to the school budget, as well as to other concrete, broadly-based issues.

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[60]Silberman, October 21, 1991 interview.

E. The Future: Possibilities and Pitfalls.

This analysis indicates that Parents United has played an important role in public education reform in Washington, D.C. over the past twelve years. Looking to the future, however, and to the broader picture of education reform in this country, some questions remain. One question is whether Parents United can continue to sustain itself as a major actor in D.C. public education. Another question of significance to a wider audience is whether the Parents United model of community involvement in public education can be exported to other cities.

There are a number of potential pitfalls for Parents United in the future. First, there is the issue, discussed previously, of the fluidity of political structures in Washington, D.C. Parents United has developed effective strategies for working within the current political context. If that environment should change, however, those strategies might no longer be successful. Changes could conceivably include more mayoral or council intervention, increased visibility of the School Board, more involvement on the part of currently less active education groups, such as the PTA, or the formation of new groups and coalitions. Ironically, the work that Parents United has done to bring education to the forefront politically and to make the process more accessible to more people could result in some displacement of its position as a key actor in local education.

The other side of this coin is the problem of bureaucratic lethargy. While home rule may be relatively new to the District, career bureaucracy is not. And bureaucracy is a notoriously limiting factor where reform is concerned. As School Board member Jay Silberman commented: "What a bureaucracy likes to do is outlast and chew up

and spit out those who want to change."[61] Silberman added that he has heard mid-level Board of Education bureaucrats in the elevator making comments such as the following: "'I don't care what they say and what they want us to do. I've been here twenty years and I've outlasted five superintendents and countless board members and I'll still be here when they get rid of this one."[62] So the possibility of thwarted reform efforts also looms over the future of public education in Washington, D.C.

A third pitfall concerns Parents United strategies for issue selection. So far, the group has been quite successful in targeting broadly-based concrete issues for action. As the group matures, it must continue to choose such consensus issues--running the risk of becoming perceived as bland--or it must venture into other areas in which consensus is not established, thereby running the risk of alienating some of its constituencies. Negotiating between these hazards could prove to be a difficult act. The perception of Parents United leaders that teacher quality and curriculum standards--issues which lack tangibility and obvious solutions--are the next "frontier" for Parents United is an example of such a potential hazard. The potential rewards of such involvement are great; but the risks are substantial as well.

Likewise, there is the danger of an expansion of the perception that Parents United is elitist in composition and function. All those who follow any media-publicized events are aware that a perception, whether true or not, can be as damaging as a fact. Again, various possibilities exist. If Parents United aggressively recruits

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[61]Silberman, October 21, 1991 interview.

[62]Ibid.

additional members and leaders, it does run the risk that, for better or worse, those new individuals may change the direction that has become identified with the group. If it does nothing, it could be increasingly perceived as irrelevant to the majority of District residents and find its membership base and its perceived legitimacy as a community-sponsored group eroding.

In spite of such potential problems, Parents United is a model of community participation that has successfully included elements of cooperation and confrontation in its advocacy of education reform. The group has relied primarily on alliance-building strategies to develop a strong base of support. The support of the legal community has also been a significant factor. But Parents United has also used confrontational tactics to good effect. While Parents United is a unique group in a city that has itself been shown to be unusual in a number of ways, other cities could profit from examination of its history, goals and tactics.